

PAUL

A MAN OF GRACE AND GRIT

STUDY FIVE

Mission Underway . . . Thanks to the Lesser-Known

Acts 9:3–31

We are watching a strong and self-willed man become crushed under the mighty hand of God. It was necessary in his training so that he might become the man God wanted him to be.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

HERCULEAN personalities fascinate us. The headstrong, self-willed, independent types who become cultural icons. They catch a vision, take command, and do what needs doing despite all obstacles.

Take Amelia Earhart. Remember her from your history books? She was a pioneering woman in aviation—the first female to fly alone and nonstop across the Atlantic. She set many records in her lifetime, achieving celebrity status in the late 1920s.

Determination like Amelia Earhart's is inspiring. But that maverick spirit can prove risky. On July 2, 1937, at age 39, Earhart disappeared over the Pacific in her attempt to circumnavigate the world. Her plane has yet to be found.

While pushing ourselves to accomplish an adventurous goal is certainly not wrong, trailblazing our own way rather than God's way is. God's Word warns us against being fiercely independent. Often, God must break that habit out of His servants before He uses them.

Before the independent, headstrong Saul of Tarsus could become Paul the apostle to the gentiles, he needed to learn humble dependence upon God and others. This *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study explores how God made that transformation in Paul's life and the benefits that come by joining conviction with dependence.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Before engaging the Word of God, it's always important to engage the God of the Word—to seek His help, blessing, and insight. Reflect on the following Psalm and then express your dependence on Jesus.

*Bend down, O LORD, and hear my prayer;
answer me, for I need your help.
Protect me, for I am devoted to you.
Save me, for I serve you and trust you.
You are my God.
Be merciful to me, O Lord,
for I am calling on you constantly.
Give me happiness, O Lord,
for I give myself to you. . . .
For you are great and perform wonderful deeds.
You alone are God.
Teach me your ways, O LORD,
that I may live according to your truth!
Grant me purity of heart,
so that I may honor you.
With all my heart I will praise you, O Lord my God.
I will give glory to your name forever. (Psalm 86:1–4, 10–12)*



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

God had big plans to use Saul in building His church. Saul's preparation, though, would prove arduous and painful. God needed to crush him of his *independent spirit* and fashion within him a *dependent spirit*.

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First, in [Acts 9:3–21](#), Jesus revealed Himself to Saul as Saul traveled to Damascus, bent on a single-minded mission to annihilate the church. Saul was converted to Christ but blinded. He had to be led by the hand into Damascus. God began His transforming work by humbling Saul through the service of many *lesser-known heroes* in Scripture.

Ananias courageously met with Saul and prayed for him. Saul regained his sight, received the Holy Spirit, was baptized, ate food, and enjoyed fellowship with other believers. *Saul took his first course in the school of dependency.*

Next, God led Saul into the Arabian wilderness. [Galatians 1:17–18](#) specifies he spent three years there. It's safe to assume Saul integrated his understanding of the Old Testament with the life and work of Jesus as Messiah. As he drank from the deep well of theology, he cultivated a deep connection with Christ. *Saul completed his second course, learning dependency on Christ alone.*

What more do you think Paul needs to learn? Think about your experience in the courses of dependency? What have you learned so far in your spiritual journey?

Next, we explore how Saul learned dependency by becoming a Christian fugitive—course three. Lesser-known heroes, like we saw in Ananias, helped him. God often takes the long, slow track when He refines us. Character development, humility, and wisdom all take time.

In the following charts, we combine observation and interpretation as we look at our passage in three sections. First, carefully observe what the text says. Then, seek to understand its meaning and relevance for following Christ today.¹ During interpretation, consult your resources like [Constable's Notes](#) at netbible.org or the [IVP New Testament Commentary on Acts](#) at biblegateway.com.

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Acts 9:3–31

Lowered in a Basket

Acts 9:22–25

Saul preached in Damascus that Jesus was the Messiah and publicly confounded the Jews, which put him in danger.



Observation



Interpretation

Read Acts 9:22–25. What happened in 9:23–24?

What reaction did these events trigger in Acts 9:25?

What do you find ironic about the source of danger, given who commissioned Saul for his initial mission into Damascus?



How is Saul's circumstance a fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy to Ananias in *Acts 9:16*?

Who were the lesser-known heroes God used to deliver Saul? What is significant about their remaining nameless?

You ever had a contract out on your life? Probably not. Some of you may have. It's terribly serious. This man was so wanted that they guarded every gate around Damascus. That's pretty humiliating. It's pretty frightening. I don't care if you're Saul of Tarsus. He now has Jews planning to kill him. But that's all part of God's plan. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Acts 9:3–31

Fellow Believers Are Skeptical <i>Acts 9:26–27</i>	
Anticipating safety and a warm welcome in Jerusalem from his Damascus escape, Saul met with the unexpected.	
 Observation	 Interpretation
What happened in Acts 9:26? Record the concerns that had driven the believers.	Read a Bible dictionary article on Barnabas and record key insights you learn.
Who helped Saul in Acts 9:27 and how did he help him?	Discuss the weight of Barnabas' recommendation and how Paul must have felt receiving it? How does God use relationships to further His plans?

“But Barnabas” (NASB). Isn’t that a great line? Out of the blue. Did Saul call Barnabas? No. Then how did Barnabas hear? I don’t know. God’s sovereign. Barnabas wasn’t confused, saying, “Oh, what am I going to do with Saul?” God tells him, “Okay, here’s right where I want you. Barnabas, pssstt, get over there.” Every time you see Barnabas, he’s encouraging. Standing up for the guy who’s losing it. Standing in place of the one who’s got a bad track record.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Acts 9:3–31

On the Move Once Again

Acts 9:28–31

After fellow believers finally welcomed him, Saul stepped behind another pulpit in Jerusalem. Then danger came knocking, and Saul once again was on the move.



Observation



Interpretation

What happened in Acts 9:28–29? Whom did Paul offend, and how did they react?

Look up *Hellenistic* online in the *Holman Bible Dictionary* and summarize what you find.

Who entered into Saul's life in Acts 9:30, and how did they help him?

Why is it significant that Saul was sent away to Tarsus?

Acts 9:31 offers a summary statement from Luke. What did he describe?

Reflect on Acts 9:31. Based on this verse, list what's indispensable for the vitality of the church.

The secret of the church is not Saul of Tarsus; it is God Almighty. It is not about a man. It isn't about independence. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Correlation: God's Calling—Our Humility

God wants to create a *dependent spirit* in every believer. One of God's aims for that process is the cultivation of humility. Let's consider three texts with slightly different angles on this topic.

Turn to *Proverbs 27:2*. What is Solomon's point, and how does it relate to humility?

The apostle Peter addressed the topic directly in *1 Peter 5:6*. The verse commands us and links that command to one of God's attributes. What promise is contained in this verse?

Finally, *Philippians 2:3–9* provides a blueprint on the topic of humility. Who is our model, and what does this passage teach about humility?

God does not use the strong, the stubborn, and the independent. He uses the humble, the broken, the bruised, those who have suffered, who have been desperate, who have been crushed. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Application: Stripping Away Our Independence

God put Saul through challenging, painful, and solitary training, and that wouldn't be the end of it! God “crushed” him to free him of his fiercely independent spirit. Three lessons from Saul's experience serve us well today.

1. **Value others.** Rather than viewing others as those who hold us back, we must embrace the fact that they are the key to our survival and success.
2. **Humble yourself.** God knows you and sees you. Yield yourself to Him and serve as unto Him. He will exalt you in His time.
3. **Trust God.** Accept that you are not indispensable. It's God's mission and plan, not yours. Accomplish the Lord's work according to the Lord's way in the Lord's *time*.

What truths from the reflections above or from your time in this study's passage are most relevant for you and why?

Reflect on your Christian experience. Can you identify another believer who, through humble service outside the limelight, has guided, served, or protected you? Describe that experience. How did it bolster your faith?

Similarly, have you come alongside a brother or sister in Christ and humbly served him or her in anonymity, willing to be that “lesser-known” person? Describe your experience. How did that encourage or stretch you? If you haven't had that opportunity, has the Lord placed anyone on your heart to quietly serve?

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Rather than being tutored to handle the limelight, we need to treasure and embrace the shadows. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Close your study in prayer.

Thank You, Father, for reducing me to a place where I would listen, believe, and obey. Thank You for the needed reminder of Your rule when I am self-willed, determined, and in a hurry. Make me patient to wait with You as You prepare me for Your ministry, in Your time. In the precious name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, "*How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?*"

For the 2025 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 2001, 2025 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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